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Not even magical reindeer who fly are immortal, and Dasher and Dancer and Prancer and Vixen, Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen were tales of Christmas mornings that had long since come to pass. Rudolph himself lived seventeen years: a respectable lifespan for the average captive reindeer. By no means a miracle. Unless such a reindeer was among the lucky few to be housed in the stalls of a certain, southern toy shop. These reindeer tended to be shorter-lived than most.

Every Christmas, you see, a few of Santa’s reindeer would fall short of the requirements needed to fly around the globe. This was not a great cumbrance to the mission itself. Santa’s mind was as sharp as his belly was round, and he knew that the reindeer who could not last the journey would be dead or close to it once they reached Russia’s nose, which looks like that of an elephant seal. Then it would be off to Alaska. Santa’s sleigh, short two or three reindeer, would fly across the Bering Sea as slowly as the petrels. Men on industrial fishing boats would look up, point, and exclaim. Then they’d joke that

Christmas would need an extension. It never did.

In the interior of Alaska, there lived a man of tremendous money and very little wealth, and the people who knew him had named him the Counter. The Counter lived in a decrepit shack, where he slouched in his desk in front of the hearth, counting and counting the money he'd made off his reindeer the previous years. Forty-three years, to be exact. When the fire burned low so as to make this process difficult, he would grab a piece of wood, toss it into the hearth, and continue his endless counting, until he'd come to believe that the

money itself was the source of his warmth. But until he could afford to buy such a truth, someone still had to chop the firewood.

This someone was a young boy, a child of the tribes who, some years ago, had been bought with the Counter’s money. Or rather, the threats that tended to accompany it, as sure as the destruction that accompanies a flame. The Counter told him nothing about his heritage, other than the story of how his people burned the money that had sold his very life. They tossed the wadded-up bills—exactly twenty-five dollars—into the flames that cooked their meat.

The boy got the sense that his master thought them fools for this. He himself did not.

He never received a dollar from his master, and it never appeared on his Christmas list. He was nearly afraid of the paper. It held a cruel sort of spirit that could hold a man captive, pretending to be warmth in the grasp of bluish fingers. Instead, he gave worship to the warmth from the firewood, which kept himself and his reindeer alive through the bitterest cold of winter. Only one thing was more precious to him than wood, and that was coal. His master spoke of it often. He screamed of it, actually.

The boy had a way of sneaking wood from his master, which he'd burn in the pit that he fashioned out of bricks in the reindeer barn. This barn was poorly constructed and drafty, and despite their hardy pelts, the reindeer relied on the fires to keep them alive through the wintry nights. The boy lended his own heat as well, snuggled up amongst their bodies in the hay. He loved his reindeer dearly. Enough to endure the abuse from his master, who chased him around with a fire poke whenever he caught him stealing wood. "Coal for Christmas!" the old man would scream. "Coal for Christmas!"

The boy could only hope. This year’s winter was longer and colder than any he’d lived through before, and their firewood supply was dwindling already. Each day, he tried to chop more wood, but his fingers grew numb and the trees were too frozen to hack with his axe’s dull blade. He dreamed about coal from Christmases past. Coal did not need to be chopped, split or hauled. It burned longer and hotter than wood. Coal was the greatest gift a boy could ever hope for. He couldn’t wait for Santa to arrive that night. It was Christmas Eve, and they were down to the last piece of wood, which his master

guarded greedily. He would need it to count his money that night.

Tonight would be the coldest night yet—the coldest Christmas in one-hundred-and-seventeen-years and twenty-three days, to be exact—and the Counter knew with certainty that Santa would need at least three replacements for his reindeer, maybe four! He would make thousands of dollars. Enough to count for years to come. He needed that last piece of firewood.

But the boy and his reindeer needed it more.

“Please, Master!” begged the young boy. “Without fire tonight, the reindeer will die!”

“Have they enough fire to last until Santa?” asked the Counter, who was counting his money. Already, his fire burned so low that he counted by candle light, and this would not do. He needed that last piece of firewood.

“They have, but—”

“Then this is no concern to me! And do not even think of stealing my wood. For if you do, then I shall set the whole barn ablaze, and they shall have fire to last till the end of their lives!” The Counter

continued his counting. The boy returned to the barn, where his beloved reindeer were crowded by the fire, which was dying by the second. With a sad heart, the boy pondered what to do. Then he made up his mind.

Santa Claus arrived with his sleigh four reindeer short, and two close to death. It was better than the Counter could had ever hoped to count! While the rosy-cheeked man did business with the Counter, he unbridled his reindeer and allowed them to rest in the barn near the fire, which burned as low as embers at this point. With his great red sack slung over his shoulder,

Santa walked to the decrepit shack, where the Counter stood on the porch, slouched beneath the weight of the cold. He rubbed his hands together, which were eager for the warmth of his money. It would be found in the great red sack, which magically revealed what a person was owed.

“Come in, come in!” cried the Counter. “You are in need of four reindeer, maybe six? Let me count up the money that is owed!”

“Why,” said Santa, who walked inside to see the hearth full of ash. “I am not sure I owe you anything! What sort of man gives fire to his

beasts but neglects an honored guest?”

“Now, you old rag! Why must you frighten me so carelessly? Do you not see the wood in front of the hearth? If you toss it in the ashes, there shall be enough fire for the both of us to count by.”

“By the red nose of Rudolph, I see not a splinter!”

“Impossible!” cried the Counter, but he stood right where Santa was standing, and he counted, and he counted not a splinter, only fifteen piles of money where a splinter should have been. There were twenty-thousand-four-hundred-

and-eighty-three dollars, zero pieces of firewood, and exactly one culprit. And it ate up the Counter in a terrible rage, so that his face grew hotter than any fire that had ever burned in the hearth.

“That boy stole my wood!” he cried. “That boy stole my wood!”

“Then my present for him shall be coal,” said Santa.

But this punishment was not enough for the Counter, who through all of his counting, had never really learned what enough truly was. So he grabbed his hot red fire poke and he ran out to the barn, and he stabbed it into the

piles of hay where he knew the boy liked to sleep. He stabbed the hay so many times that he lost count of just how many. But it occurred to him, for the first time in his life, that it must have been enough, for the barn was all up in flames from the hay that his poke had set fire to, and now he was trapped inside. Then Santa ran into the flaming barn, crying out for his reindeer, and now he was trapped as well.

By the time the boy walked out of the woods with his axe in one hand and a bundle of sticks in the other, the barn was reduced to nothing but ashes. How long did it take?

Nobody knows. There was no one to count.

But there were twenty-five reindeer for the boy to look after, including Santa’s reindeer, who followed him loyally despite being close to death. They loved their boy dearly, and he loved them back, enough to count each one as they walked into the shack and out of the cold.

The boy threw the piles of money into the hearth, which made as good tinder as any, it happened. His people were not fools, after all. And, under one pile, he found the last piece of firewood, which he tossed into the fire as well. It was

enough to keep him and his reindeer warm through the coldest night in over a century. Then, in the morning, the boy peeked into the great red sack that Santa had left on the desk, and it showed him what he was owed.

It was coal. A never-ending supply of coal.

He didn’t even try to count it.